



Australian Bureau of Statistics

1301.6 - Tasmanian Year Book, 1996

ARCHIVED ISSUE Released at 11:30 AM (CANBERRA TIME) 22/04/2004

Feature Article - Art in Tasmania

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In 1852 the colonial artist, Louisa Anne Meredith, noted, 'landscape sketching and watercolour fever raging with an extraordinary vehemence among the sons and daughters of Tasmania'. Tasmania, with its superb natural environment, continues to be highly attractive to artists: there are more artists per capita here than in any other Australian State. Historically, as now, numbers of artists from other States and other countries, particularly Britain, settle in Tasmania, the resultant cross-fertilisation having contributed significantly to the current sophistication and diversity of art produced here.

Visitors to Tasmania keen to acquire a sense of its history may do so most enjoyably by viewing public collections of colonial and later nineteenth century art. The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart and the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston hold nationally significant collections of paintings by early artists working in Tasmania. Besides being a pleasure to view for aesthetic reasons alone, these highly distinctive works offer insights into the colonial attitudes which shaped early Tasmania. For example, Benjamin Duterrau's *The Conciliation* (held by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery) is regarded as Australia's first history painting. It is in fact a fascinating example of colonial propaganda, a heavily fictionalised rendition of the devastating outcomes of George Augustus Robinson's attempts to 'civilise' the Tasmanian Aborigines. John Glover's paintings of Tasmania as a golden pastoral arcadia indicate how early settlers believed that an essentially European vision of pastoral wealth could be implanted onto the geographically ancient Tasmanian terrain. Nevertheless, Glover's works remain among the most beautiful and topographically accurate of Tasmanian landscape paintings.

In the mid-nineteenth century the painter Charles Piguenit joined scientific exploration parties into wilderness areas of Tasmania. His paintings of sites like Lake St Clair and Cradle Mountain offer those aspects of the Tasmanian landscape which so appealed to the Victorian romantic imagination: poetic atmospheric effects, majestic isolation and the sweeping grandeur of panoramic vistas. Other highlights of these collections include colonial portraits by Thomas Wainwright and Thomas Bock, maritime paintings-some of which refer to Tasmania's early whaling industry - and the curiously charming still lifes of the convict artist, John Buelow Gould.

A sense of Tasmania's past may be further augmented by a visit to the Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts, which is situated at the State Library in Hobart. Settling in Tasmania in the early 1830s, the Allports became an important Tasmanian family whose activities straddled both the professional and artistic worlds. They were also dedicated collectors. The Allport Collection, bequeathed to the State of Tasmania in 1968 with the proviso that its contents never leave the State, consists of fine examples of eighteenth and nineteenth century furniture and decorative arts together with paintings, prints and drawings by family members, several of whom were gifted artists, and their circle of artist friends.

Given the promising nineteenth century origins of Tasmanian art, it is perhaps odd that art produced in Tasmania during the first half of the twentieth century is distinctly lacklustre. While

accomplished works were produced by Jack Carington Smith and Edith Holmes, their interpretation of modernism is academic and lacks real vigour. During this period Tasmania produced no artists who achieved national prominence. The exception is the outstanding neo-classical modernist, Jean Bellette, who, after studying at the Hobart Technical College, departed for Sydney and the wilder modernist shores of Europe. Works by these artists, along with contemporaries such as Eileen Crow, may be seen at both the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery.

The programs of both these institutions include temporary exhibitions of contemporary art, a number of which focus on recent Tasmanian art. The Macquarie House Gallery in Launceston, an annex of the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, is dedicated to mounting six contemporary exhibitions annually. The contemporary holdings of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery are rotated for display and visitors to the Museum are usually afforded the opportunity to view recent Tasmanian works, including some fine examples of craft, decorative arts and design produced here.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Tasmanian artist Bea Maddock emerged nationally as one of Australia's outstanding conceptually-based print makers. Examples of Maddock's prints and works in other media may be seen at both the Hobart and Launceston museums previously mentioned. She is also associated with, and on occasion exhibits with, the Snakepit Gallery in Launceston, an artists' collective with an energetic program focusing on recent work by artists living in the north of the State.

The 1980s witnessed a flourishing of art in Tasmania and it has continued to expand and diversify up to the present. The landscape and world of natural phenomena continue to be vital to artists in Tasmania. Indeed, the 1980s witnessed a resurgence of landscape-based art here, in large part triggered by the Green Debate and the battle for the Franklin River, which focused world attention on Tasmania. As this debate permeated the lives of most Tasmanians, inevitably artists like the photographer David Stephenson and the painter David Keeling saw that powerful socio-political, philosophical or metaphysical questions could be posited through the landscape genre. Landscape art could be rescued from its tired association with traditional watercolours and post-card style wilderness photography to be re-embraced into the realm of contemporary issues.

However, landscape-based art is just one of a multiplicity of artistic concerns here. The sheer diversity of practice forbids any attempt at general, sweeping statements. Several younger Tasmanian artists have recently achieved a measure of national recognition: Anne MacDonald has the distinction of being the first photographer to be selected for the prestigious Moët et Chandon national touring exhibition; the painter Tim Burns has been twice selected for the Moët. Recently the photographer Jane Eisemann, the photo-media artist David McDowell and the installation artist Julie Gough have been selected for inclusion in *Perspecta* in Sydney.

Regrettably, Tasmania is the only Australian State which does not boast a contemporary art museum, so visitors to the State are obliged to visit a range of public and commercial galleries to acquire some sense of the range of art practice here.

Hobart's Salamanca Place offers four good commercial galleries - Dick Bett, Handmark, Despard and Sidewalk - as well as the Long Gallery in the Salamanca Arts Centre. In Launceston, Watson's Fine Art is situated in York Square.

Public galleries which focus on contemporary art are situated at both campuses of the School of Art at the University of Tasmania. The Plimsoll Gallery, an adjunct to the School of Art at Hobart, runs an excellent program of well curated exhibitions, many of which feature Tasmanian painters, photographers, print makers, sculptors, installation artists and designers as well as those working with computer-generated images and digital technology. The Plimsoll's coordinator is Pat Brassington, a photographer who is known well beyond Tasmania for her mysterious, often

surreal, occasionally dark-humoured, images.

Two well-established regional galleries with regularly changing exhibitions are situated in Burnie and Devonport. Contemporary Art Services Tasmania (CAST) supports, presents and promotes contemporary Tasmanian art through publications, special projects and exhibitions, many of which tour nationally and to the aforementioned public galleries in Tasmania.

This page last updated 8 December 2006

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